

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RANGOON 001199

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS, SA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/18/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [BM](#) [IN](#) [PK](#) [CE](#) [NP](#) [BG](#)

SUBJECT: SOUTH ASIAN VIEWS ON BURMA: ENGAGE THE GENERALS

REF: A. RANGOON 1198

[1](#)B. RANGOON 1053

Classified By: CDA Shari Villarosa for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The Burmese regime has generally looked North and East (China and ASEAN) for its foreign political relationships and to China and Thailand for its primary economic ties to the outside world. India's two-year old policy of sustained engagement with the current SPDC regime, however, has resulted in at least some of the regime's attention shifting to the West. The Charge's recent round of courtesy calls on the Ambassadors of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal revealed a familiar chorus of calls for engaging the regime, but once again few examples that such an approach has yielded results. End Summary.

INDIA: AN OPENING COULD BRING THE CHAPS AROUND

[1](#)2. (C) Newly arrived Indian Ambassador Bhaskar Kumar Mitra told the Charge during an early October courtesy call that "in principle" India can't take exception to the U.S. and EU policies of applying pressure on the Burmese regime. He said that Western isolation, however, had cut the SPDC off and given the Chinese "free reign" to exert influence in Burma. It's clear that Burma has been isolated for too long, Mitra said, and India had felt (in 2003) the need to reassess its own approach after 15 years of no results.

[1](#)3. (C) Modestly declaring himself no expert on Burma (he served as DCM here 1989-1993), Mitra said he could "easily observe that every approach to the regime has failed." He noted that the overall political and economic situation was deteriorating, and the 2004 ouster of former Prime Minister General Khin Nyunt had "aggravated" the situation. If there was only some small opening, he lamented, "we might be able to bring these chaps around." He suggested that India had previously held some expectation that oil and gas exploration would open things up politically in Burma, but "even that hasn't happened."

[1](#)4. (C) The Charge countered that she saw absolutely no signs that the regime's top leadership intends to open up, or to alter their behavior in any way that undercuts their priority of keeping power. "It's not the international community that is responsible for decline," she pointed out, "it's the generals who have no interest in the welfare of their own people." When Mitra offered that "at least education is not too bad here," the Charge disagreed, saying that while the older generation had benefited from good education, standards had steadily deteriorated under the military.

[1](#)5. (C) Ambassador Mitra inquired about efforts to raise Burma at the UN Security Council. The Charge said that a UNSC discussion had merit, given the regime's utter disregard for all other efforts by the UN and the international community. She cited the example of Avian Influenza, noting that every ASEAN member, except one, Burma, had taken important steps to address the regional and global threats posed by this disease. Mitra appealed for engagement with the senior SPDC leaders, "Why not at least try?" he asked. The Charge responded that the generals dismiss such overtures, noting that Secretary Rice had met recently with ASEAN foreign ministers in New York, and FM Nyan Win "didn't even respond" to her points on Burma.

[1](#)6. (C) The Charge told Mitra that it would be helpful if the SPDC heard messages on the importance of dialogue, democracy, and human rights from a variety of countries in the region, observing that "Burma is not just a Western issue." Mitra agreed, but said that an abrupt transition in Burma could lead to chaos, which would not be in India's best interests. The Charge responded that for this reason the USG advocated a national reconciliation process that includes all parties in Burma; "the regime needs to talk to the opposition, not imprison them."

PAKISTAN: SANCTIONS NEUTRALIZED BY NEIGHBORS

[1](#)7. (C) During a September 28 courtesy call, Pakistani Ambassador Mohd Nawaz Chaudry expressed support for Western efforts to restore democracy to Burma, but also doubts over the current policy of pressure. Chaudry said that the engagement efforts of the three main foreign actors in Burma

today--China, India and ASEAN--effectively "neutralize" the effects of Western pressure and sanctions. He claimed that the impact of sanctions had been largely borne by the poor, and asked how the SPDC could be forced into any sort of political compromise. The Charge stated that the West had not damaged the country, but rather the SPDC had, and it appeared no foreign country had any leverage at present.

18. (C) Ambassador Chaudry noted that until the late 1990s, the Indians, Chinese, and Malaysians, as well as senior Burmese military figures, regularly met with Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK), but they have now all abandoned her and the NLD. He said he disagreed with those who felt ASSK was unwilling to negotiate. The key challenge, he said, was how to make the SPDC willing to talk, but added that the regime had marginalized ASSK. Chaudry admitted that ASSK would still easily win a fair election, but asked how the SPDC could ever allow such a result. He opined that the NLD under ASSK has no effective structure or party rank and file, just a cult of personality. He added that the SPDC would more likely collapse from internal strains. Chaudry expressed the hope that new military leaders might recognize the importance of change and reform, but felt that the GOB had focused its efforts on the ethnic cease-fire groups because they represented a greater threat to the GOB than ASSK.

19. (C) The Pakistani Ambassador cited former PM Khin Nyunt as someone who had not been born a democrat, but had learned to be more open over the years. He said the current perception is that the SPDC has been severely weakened by his ouster, and questioned whether the top two generals might be replaced soon. He called General Thura Shwe Mann (current Armed Forces Joint Chief of Staff) "the man to watch" and noted his youth, ambition, and recent prominence in local media events. Chaudry mentioned that Burma's "National Security Advisor" (NFI) had recently visited Pakistan and met with Musharaff. When asked about whether the GOP had raised the need for democracy and reform with him, Chaudry ignored the question and launched into a lengthy defense of reforms and democracy within Pakistan.

110. (C) From an economic perspective, Chaudry said that Singapore had about US\$1.2 billion invested in Burma; China had US\$900 million; and India only US\$6 million. Black market trade likely dwarfed official trade figures. He claimed the Indians sought to bring Burma into their sphere of influence. India wants to build a blue-water navy from Arabia to Australia, he said, and the Chinese also see Burma as an avenue to blue water access. Chinese investment in extending road networks (a new "Burma Road") and building a pipeline from western Burma to Kunming were designed to bring the country closer into its resource and transportation networks.

111. (C) Chaudry noted that the 150-300 companies that trade with the Generals are getting richer, while everyone else was shut out. "The SPDC," he said, "controls the Rangoon largesse, while people are dying of hunger in the provinces." He added that Burma's political and economic mess was so deep-seated and complex that it would take decades for even a benign government to manage the situation. He agreed that democracy was the best system of governance, but doubted it would be ideal for a nation like Burma. Chaudry saw little future for the country unless the SPDC and the opposition can unite. He suggested the West adopt fixed benchmarks as incentives: "do this much and you will get this."

112. (C) Bio Note: Chaudry has been in Burma for over a year and is himself a former political prisoner, jailed in Pakistan as a student leader for supporting former PM Ali Bhutto. He expressed sympathy for political prisoners in Burma, but defended the SPDC regime. He is very windy; he spoke for 85 minutes of the Charge's 90-minute call, and extended the meeting with an unsolicited 10-minute exposition on Kashmir and what he saw as Indian manipulation of the situation there. End Bio Note.

BANGLADESH, SRI LANKA, AND NEPAL: NOT PLAYERS

113. (C) Newly arrived Bangladeshi Ambassador Mohammed Khairuzzaman, during the Charge's October 6 call, enthusiastically advocated engagement with the SPDC, suggesting that the UN process had proven ineffective. "The regime looks inward and distrusts the UN system," Khairuzzaman said, "and since everyone has a price, we need to give (the Burmese generals) something from our side like Thailand, Singapore, and China do." Khairuzzaman observed that the SPDC generals fear persecution by an eventual tribunal, and claimed that ASSK seeks a top post in a future government, "a position that is not helpful to a political resolution." The Charge replied that they needed to talk together to determine their future; history offered many examples of possible ways forward.

114. (C) Khairuzzaman pressed again for engagement, suggesting that "a little shift" from either side can change many things. The Charge replied that the regime did not respond to overtures and has no desire to engage. She added that it

was important to look at the fundamental objectives of the SPDC regime: the generals want to hang on to power and they have demonstrated they will do everything necessary to keep it. The Charge urged Bangladesh to join an international consensus that pressed the regime to be inclusive in reaching any political resolution, observing that the National Convention process could not work because it had excluded key actors. Khairuzzaman again raised engagement, but also expressed deep frustration with multiple delays that Bangladesh had experienced in securing cooperation from the GOB to complete a road project linking his country with Burma.

15. (C) Khairuzzaman said he plans to spend most of his time focusing on issues in Rakhine State on the border with Bangladesh, in particular encouraging the regime to change its posture on dealing with Rohingya Muslims. He described his bewilderment that Muslims in this area were not even permitted to plow their fields to support themselves. Apart from this, he said he could "accept the fact" that the GOB would not permit Muslims to travel outside their townships (Note: Rohingya Muslims in northern Rakhine State are stateless and denied many basic rights, e.g. refused passports and identity cards, denied the right to marry, prohibited from relocating to neighboring towns, blocked from attending post-secondary institutions, etc. End Note.)

16. (C) During a September 27 courtesy call, Sri Lanka Ambassador D.M.M. Ranaraja focused on his own domestic situation, describing Sri Lanka's recent elections as a disaster and complaining about the frequent policy changes that come with each new election. On Burma, however, he said that foreign policy remains the same: engagement is preferable to sanctions. Ranaraja noted, however, that minimal trade existed between the two countries, intimating that Sri Lanka had no influence over the SPDC. Posted to Burma for the past two years, he observed that the GOB had the practice of starting rumors to control public opinion and manipulate the population.

17. (C) Nepali Ambassador Victory SJB Rana, a retired General who recently filled a long vacancy in Rangoon, also indicated that relations between Burma and India were minimal. The most significant issue to occupy his time, and not very much of it, is a fairly sizable Nepali community that emigrated to Burma years ago. Rana indicated these Nepali were curiosities more than problems, with few family ties left in Nepal but still interested in maintaining cultural ties.

COMMENT: ASK NOT WHAT WE CAN DO

18. (C) The Indians and Pakistanis are the obvious candidates for applying pressure on the regime. Both recognize the need for a more democratic system, yet appear unlikely to pursue it themselves. As with the ASEANS (reftels), they appear to be thinking more of what the United States can do, rather than how either India or Pakistan might be able to make a difference. End Comment.
Villarosa